

A Land of Hills and Valleys

A Parable of Trust

By George Davis and Michael Clark

The events of the Old Testament are examples, recorded for our admonition. "These are all warning markers-DANGER!-in our history books, written down so that we don't repeat their mistakes. Our positions in the story are parallel--they at the beginning, we at the end-and we are just as capable of messing it up as they were" (1 Corinthians 10:11 The Message Bible).

God's dealings with natural Israel perfectly parallel His dealings with His people today--they at the beginning, we at the end. Having said this, let's go back to a time when God was preparing His people to make the great transition from living in Egypt (a biblical type of the world system) to living in the land that He promised to their ancestor, Abraham--paying special attention so that we don't repeat their mistakes. Let's listen in as God explains to them how different this new land is from the land they and their fathers slaved in for the previous 400 years.

"For the land which you go in to possess is not like the land of Egypt, from which you came out, where you sowed your seed and watered it with your foot laboriously as in a garden of vegetables. But the land which you enter to possess is a land of hills and valleys which drinks water of the rain of the heavens, A land for which the Lord your God cares; the eyes of the Lord your God are always upon it from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. And if you will diligently heed My commandments which I command you this day--to love the Lord your God and to serve Him with all your [mind and] heart and with your entire being-- I will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the latter rain, that you may gather in your grain, your new wine, and your oil. And I will give grass in your fields for your cattle, that you may eat and be full." (Deuteronomy 11:10-15 AMP)

This word from God undoubtedly challenged the limits of Israel's imagination. This new land represented a radical paradigm shift. But more than just a change of surroundings was in view here. The geography and water table of this new land would immediately bring Israel into a new position of trust and vulnerability before God. God had created this geographical wonder, now known as Israel, to teach His people, then and now, a living lesson of dependence and trust. Without regular rains, even springs and creeks

soon cease to flow. Every spring and river within this new land depends on Him Who promised to send the early and the latter rains.

The average Egyptian believed that the annual flooding of the Nile was due to the god Hapy or Hapi. The online encyclopedia *Wikipedia* states: "Hapy was a deification of the annual flooding (inundation) of the Nile River, in Egyptian mythology, which deposited rich silt on its banks, allowing the Egyptians to grow crops... Some of the titles of Hapy were, Lord of the Fishes and Birds of the Marshes and Lord of the River Bringing Vegetation." *Wikipedia* further explains, Osiris (Greek language), also Usiris (to the Egyptians) was usually called the god of the Afterlife... Osiris is one of the oldest gods for whom records have been found. Osiris was not only merciful judge of the dead in the afterlife, but also the underworld agency that granted all life, including sprouting vegetation and the fertile flooding of the Nile River."

The Egyptians also believed that Osiris was originally the Nile, its water, the soil on its banks and the fruit of the waters of the Nile, which eventually became the greater Egypt. The natural Nile River seemed to verify this myth. Its waters carried rich sediment from upriver and deposited it on its banks downstream, constantly replenishing the soil with new and very fertile topsoil. Seeing this, the Egyptians concluded that the Nile (Osiris) was still making Egypt. Everything pertaining to seedtime and harvest was done in homage to the Nile.

For 400 years, the descendants of Abraham were absorbed into this idolatrous culture and were, deeply influenced by it. Generation after generation witnessed an undying devotion to the Nile. Israel, like the rest of Egypt, came to reverence the Nile as their source. Possibly Moses' mother cast the infant on the Nile in a basket, believing that Osiris would be merciful and watch over the child. When the flooding of the Nile receded, Israel, with the rest of Egypt, irrigated their crops by digging channels for conducting water into the beds where they had sown seed. When a sufficient amount of water poured in they used a foot to mound an obstruction in the channel and stop the flow. They also had foot operated water wheels that lifted the water to their farm land. Irrigation was measured and controlled by them. They looked to the Nile for their provision. This would be the primary difference between Egypt and the new land. This Egyptian process of watering required great care and labor. Regular and lavish watering was necessary to turn the Egyptian desert into a garden. Without intervention the crops withered and the desert reclaimed its ground. Egyptians could hold their

heads high when they harvested their crops. They did everything and it reflected very well on them.

Though Israel was virtually absorbed by Egypt, they remained a people of higher calling, "a peculiar people." A promise had been made (Genesis 13:15) and the compromise of their present bondage and idolatry would soon give way to the fulfillment of that promise. God honored His promise to Abraham by first delivering his descendants from the overt bondage of Egypt. This proved to be the easy part. Then the time-intensive process of getting the Egyptian bondage out of the people of God began. At one point while Moses was up on Mount Sinai with God, they appointed Aaron, the brother of Moses, to make them a golden calf to worship and they danced before it (See Exodus 32). Israel's devotion to the gods of Egypt had to be purged in order to prepare them to live before Him in the land of hills and valleys. It all began with the introduction of a radical concept, "the land to which you are going . . . is not as the land of Egypt . . . where you sowed your seed and watered it with your foot. . . But . . . is a land of hills and valleys, drinking water from the rain of the heavens."

Having been delivered by the mighty hand of God, Israel found themselves in transition between two countries, daring to imagine what changes awaited them as they trekked through the wilderness. After forty years of wandering, the time came for God to bring Israel into the land that He promised to their father Abraham. What would it be like to live in a land of hills and valleys, where everything is dependent upon Him who sends "the former and the latter rain" (20 to 30 inches annually)? He described it as a land of "milk and honey" and the spies they sent into the land returned with a huge cluster of grapes hanging on a staff between two of them as well as pomegranates and figs. ["We came unto the land where you sent us, and surely it flows with milk and honey; and this is the fruit of it"](#) (See Numbers 13:27).

Because God is central to everything He does, He has skillfully woven the need for Himself into all of His creation. He is masterful at creating circumstances through which He can teach His children to trust Him. And so He leads us to a land where His watchfulness and care are required from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. This new land represented an utter God-dependent state. It was, in every detail, a parable of trust. Even the dew from Mount Hermon that fell on the mountains of Zion, would, in time, serve as a constant reminder of the blessings of God (See Psalms 133:3).

God spoke through Isaiah, saying, "I will water it every moment; lest any harm it, I will keep it night and day" (Isaiah 27:2-3). God had fashioned this new land in such a way that Israel could no longer water the Egyptian way. The Jordan River, the only river in the land, flowed through a deep rift in a wilderness area so that its waters could not be used for irrigation by the foot. They had to depend on heaven for rain.

The fairy tale ending "and they all lived happily ever after" did not happen. In the land of hills and valleys God controls the flow of the water and promises to turn off that flow the moment we stop trusting Him so that we will repent. Israel had to learn this and so must we. Israel did not put away the Egyptian deities that their ancestors worshiped.

When Israel's King Ahab married a foreign wife, Jezebel, he took to worshipping her god, Baal. "And he raised up an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he had built in Samaria. And Ahab made an idol pole; and Ahab did more to provoke the LORD God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him" (1 Kings 16:32-33 KJ2000). Their courts were filled with the prophets of Baal. God sent his prophet Elijah into this mess and he prophesied according to the will of God. "As the LORD God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word." It did not rain for three and a half years and only started again when the people repented and acknowledged that the God of Abraham and Moses was the true God, "The Lord [Jehovah] He is god" (See 1 Kings 18).

It was a half-hearted repentance that did not last. More droughts were followed by invading armies as God judged them. Hundreds of years after the exodus God sent another prophet, Jeremiah, to declare His Judgment upon them for not obeying Him and wanting to return to Egypt. Here are a few excerpts from Jeremiah that will give us a sense of His overall message, the dire consequences of their disobedience and the exact nature of their disobedience.

Hear the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob, and all the clans of the house of Israel. Thus says the LORD: "What wrong did your fathers find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthlessness, and became worthless? They did not say, 'Where is the LORD who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness, in a land of deserts and pits, in a land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that none passes through, where no man dwells?' And I brought you into a plentiful land to enjoy its fruits and its good things. But when you came in, you defiled my land and made my

heritage an abomination. The priests did not say, 'Where is the LORD?' Those who handle the law did not know me; the shepherds transgressed against me; the prophets prophesied by Baal and went after things that do not profit. Therefore I still contend with you, declares the LORD, and with your children's children I will contend. For cross to the coasts of Cyprus and see, or send to Kedar and examine with care; see if there has been such a thing. Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for that which does not profit. Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the LORD, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water. (Jeremiah 2:4-13 ESV)

Cisterns are carved out of the earth like ponds and made to hold water when there is no rain. The trouble is that the land has to be just right so they will not leak. Israel carved out leaky cisterns, and they forsook the One Who is the Fountain of living water. Later Jeremiah prophesied, "They do not say in their hearts, 'Let us fear the LORD our God, who gives the rain in its season, the autumn rain and the spring rain, and keeps for us the weeks appointed for the harvest'" (Jeremiah 5:24 ESV).

Here is the description of the consequences of Israel's sin:

"Judah mourns and her gates languish; her people lament on the ground, and the cry of Jerusalem goes up. Her nobles send their servants for water; they come to the cisterns; they find no water; they return with their vessels empty; they are ashamed and confounded and cover their heads. Because of the ground that is dismayed, since there is no rain on the land, the farmers are ashamed; they cover their heads." (Jeremiah 14:1-4 ESV)

Because of Israel's idolatry, God did as He had promised and withheld the former and the latter rains from the land (See Deuteronomy 11:13-14 and Jeremiah 3:1-3). God sent drought so they would repent. They trusted in their broken cisterns, worshipped Baal, and no one missed the Lord. Neither the people nor the priests thought to ask, "Where is the Lord?" In spite of the dryness, Israel resisted God's discipline and refused to be ashamed. It was religion as usual in their worship of false gods.

This is an admonition to us today! We give lip service to being followers of God, yet we refuse to listen to His voice. There is plenty of activity in Christendom today but where

is the Lord? We live by the bread we earn by our work, but we do not live by "every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (See Matthew 4:4). There is another kind of famine upon us as God judges us for our rebellion. Another prophet foresaw thousands of years ago that this would be our state.

Behold, the days come, says the Lord GOD, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD: And they shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east, they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the LORD, and shall not find it. (Amos 8:11-12 KJ2000)

There is a famine of hearing every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. Few listen to the Spirit of God that Jesus sent in His place to lead and teach us (See John 14:17, 15:26 and 16:13-14). Instead we make broken cisterns, seminary trained men, to parrot words that once came from the mouth of God. There is no inspiration. For the most part, these men don't even teach that hearing the voice of the Spirit is possible. They prefer their congregations to listen only to them. They teach and draw away disciples after themselves (See Acts 20: 29-31).

Where is the rain of His presence? Has He, as He said so long ago through the prophet, ". . .come to us as the rain," or are our gatherings as parched and dry as the ground under Israel's feet? When we bring our bottles, do we find water there? And do the farmers (workers among us), who plant and plant, cover their heads in shame for the lack of any real harvest for the kingdom of God? Is there any rain in the land? Dare we ask ourselves, Where is the Lord?

Forsaking Our Fountain

Back in Israel, drought was taking its toll. The heaven over their heads became brass and the earth under their feet became iron (Deuteronomy 28:23). Regardless of these harsh consequences, they refused to be ashamed and turn from their sin. Instead they returned to their idolatrous Egyptian ways. They compensated for their lack of rain by digging cisterns to collect what precious little water there was so they could manage things themselves. Rather than repent, in true Egyptian fashion, they broke out the shovels. Though they were now in the land of hills and valleys, they did not want to depend on heaven for rain. Israel's apostasy was two-phase. Two action verbs describe these two evils - "forsaken" and "hewed." Israel committed two evils--they forsook the Fountain of living waters and dug cisterns for themselves. All of Israel's sins sprang

from these two evils. The more glaring sins of Israel--idolatry, immorality, murder, theft, deceit (you name it)--were not the primary problem.

What was so evil about digging reservoirs to contain water in times of drought? This seems responsible from a purely natural point of view and the prudent thing to do. It was evil because they were resisting the discipline of God that was intended to bring them back to Him. To avoid the consequences of the first evil, forsaking the Fountain, they made substitutes with their own hands just as they had hand carved their idols. They found a life to sustain them and give them hope. It was the life of their hands. Isaiah spoke to Israel about their persistent refusal to repent.

You are wearied in the length of your way; Yet you did not say, There is no hope. You have found the life of your hand; Therefore you were not grieved. (Isaiah 57:10 NKJV)

And again,

He feeds on ashes; a deluded heart has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself or say, "Is there not a lie in my right hand?" (Isaiah 44:20 ESV)

A lie is in the right hand. Throughout the scriptures, the right hand is a symbol of power, resource and direction. The lie in man's right hand is the vain promise of self-deliverance, whether it is in digging cisterns or making idols. The idolatry is trusting in the life of our hands. "Is there not a lie in my right hand?" We should each ask this. Is there not a lie in or right hand when we move willy-nilly by a program-driven agenda, hoping to dance up a good rain storm? Israel also was weary but they found renewed hope in their digging. They found comfort in the strength of their hands. Do we?

We make program after church program and hold special event after special event and then pray that God will bless our efforts. Yet the flow of His living water was meant to come from Him alone and He wants to share it with us! Jesus said, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that said to you, Give me to drink; you would have asked of him, and he would have given you living water" (John 4:10 KJ2000). Do we know the Gift of God? Do His sheep hear His voice or do they follow another (See John 10:4-5)? Following another is considered normal in Christian circles today and has been for almost two thousand years (See 1 John 2: 26-27)!

An Admonition

Christ (our Joshua) has led all believers into a land of hills and valleys, a gracious land where we have not labored, filled with cities that we did not build (See John 14:1-3) and vineyards and olive orchards that we did not plant (see Joshua 24:13). It is a land dependent on heaven for rain.

"Christian activity" can be a distraction from the hopelessness and powerlessness that results from living by a life that is not Christ's. When we look out across Christendom today, what do we see? Do we see a healthy, well kept vineyard or one that is feeble and cut up by man made fences? Do we see living water flowing to the vines of the Lord or a pockmarked landscape, littered with broken, dry cisterns? Today the times of refreshing rarely come and the land is dry. People are weary and empty. Week after week they come to their cisterns (denominated churches) and find no water. Week after week they return home with their canteens empty, hoping to hold on until the next Sunday service. The farmers (those who plant and nurture seed), are ashamed of their lack of lasting, eternal fruit. The ground remains a cracked and dry testament against us.

We knew a pastor who dreamed he saw his flock in a fenced in field that was dry and littered with debris. One of the sheep chewing on a dry stick looked up to him and said, "This is really good, pastor." It shook him to his roots, but he still ended up trading one dry field for another one with more exciting programs. He did not get the message and was eventually forced to step down from being a pastor.

Dare we ask, "Is there a lie in my right hand?" Dare we admit that our programs are fruitless? Are we willing to surrender the unbiblical notion that our works somehow merit the favor of God? Will we renounce our confidence in the strength of our hands and reaffirm our confidence in His supply and watchful care?

Do we, like ancient Israel, prefer digging over repentance? Do we compensate for God's withheld blessings by building splendid cisterns-, hoping to make a name for ourselves (See Genesis 11:1-9)? We profess to serve God, but are we honest enough to admit that our best efforts are flawed (cracked) and won't retain one drop of divine life? Will we admit that we have all drunk stagnant, dirty water from ecclesiastical cisterns?

Blind people following blind guides eventually end up in a ditch. The church of Laodicea was lying in one of these ditches with its door shut to Jesus. Inside they

thought that they were doing fine, "We are rich, increased with goods and have need of nothing." But God saw their real condition. "You are wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked." Because there is no rain in the land, the farmers are disappointed and some even cover their heads in shame, but the digging goes on, and on, and on.

God delivered Israel out of slavery in Egypt by sending Moses to deal with Pharaoh. In about two weeks they were on their way to the Promised Land. It took over forty years and a lot of dying to get Egypt out of the people. If you are a Christian, Christ (our Passover) has delivered you from bondage to the law and sin (See Romans 6:14). You have learned what the Psalmist meant when he wrote in praise to God, "Your way is in the sea, and Your path in the great waters, and Your footsteps are not known" (Psalms 77:19). You have passed through the sanctifying waters of the Red Sea separating you from the control of this world and you have sung the song of Moses "the horse and rider are thrown into the sea." You have journeyed through the wilderness. You have come through the parted waters of the Jordan, baptized into Christ, which likewise separates you unto the greater purposes of God. Thank God! There on the far banks of Jordan, at Gilgal, the Lord fully, "rolled away the reproach of Egypt from off you" (See Joshua 5:9)!

And now *in Christ* you have entered a land under the constant supervision of God who said, "I do keep it; I will water it every moment: lest any hurt it, I will keep it night and day." (Isaiah 27:3). He is delivering you from that Egyptian in you that wants to do good works and water by foot without Him. You are living in a land of hills and valleys, learning to live in dependence on the rain of heaven.

God desires a people fully separated unto Him—a holy priesthood, fully representing Him in all things. He wants people who will be His husbandry, the planting of His hands (1 Corinthians 3:9), a people whose growth and maturity can be attributed only to His grace and who, being born into His household, receive the birthright without trying to merit it. Like Isaac, we are heirs to everything. We are what we are purely by the work of Christ on the cross and the grace of God. How quickly we forget that we, like Isaac, are children of promise. All we are and have is from God. "I handed you a land for which you did not work, towns you did not build. And here you are now living in them and eating from vineyards and olive groves you did not plant." What is the reasonable response to such grace? "So now: Fear GOD. Worship him in total commitment. Get rid

of the gods your ancestors worshiped on the far side of The River (the Euphrates) and in Egypt. You, worship GOD" (Joshua 24:13-14 MSG).

The constant test in the lesson of Israel is whether we will trust and keep trusting Him Who sends the former and the latter rains. Will we drink from the Spring of living water or dig cisterns? Will we depend on heaven for rain or return to the idolatry of watering by foot? Will we be to the praise of his glory or will we trust in the life of our hands?

In all our talk of reformation and revival, do we go this far? Have we abandoned the idolatry that has made much of Christianity fruitless? Have we forgotten, or perhaps never known divine life, something quite apart from doctrine and method? Have we forgotten, or perhaps never known that divine life requires union long before it gives answers and brings proper, God-pleasing form and function? This is not our doctrine. This is Jesus' doctrine. It was He who promised, "I am the vine, you are the branches: He that abides in me, and I in him, the same brings forth much fruit: for without me you can do nothing" (John 15:5 KJ2000). This abiding in His life must be enjoyed for a season before the trees on the banks of our lives begin to produce fruit for the healing of the nations. Fruitfulness is a foregone conclusion if we repent of our dead works, abandon our fruitless methods (stop digging broken cisterns) and return to the Source—the Fountain of living waters.

Then shall we know, if we follow on to know the LORD; His going forth is prepared as the morning; and He shall come unto us as the rain, as the latter and former rain unto the earth. (Hosea 6:3 KJ21)

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